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ABSTRACT

Developed to help instructors prevent their students from dropping out, this paper presents findings from the psychological literature that pertain to persistence. The paper focuses on research concerning: (1) goals, sub-goals, and feedback, which asserts that persistence at a task is influenced by goals, by whether or not a series of subgoals have been formulated, and by feedback to actions; (2) expectancy-value theories, which suggests that motivation and persistence at a task are jointly influenced by the degree to which individuals expect that their actions will lead to results, and the extent to which they value those results; (3) perceived self-efficacy, which maintains that persistence is influenced by individuals' judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action; (4) attribution of the reasons for past successes and failures; and (5) interruption-discrepancy theory of emotions, which claims that persistence is heavily influenced by the emotions felt when problems interrupt the completion of tasks. Specific findings in these areas of research are presented along with a series of research-based practical suggestions for encouraging persistence. 5 references. (EJV)

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HOW TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION: FIVE AREAS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND THEIR APPLICATIONS

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Introduction:

Instructors who get interested in increasing their students' persistence and in preventing them from dropping out can easily find suggestions. Recent research offers many ideas, most of them empirically based. See for example the work of Vincent Tinto, Alexander Astin, and Lee Noel. In addition, many colleges gather promising practices developed by their staff members.

But a thoughtful instructor who reviews this literature finds several problems. Which suggestions are valid? Which are the most powerful? Which can be transferred from one context to another? If an instructor with limited time and resources wants to improve retention, which practices should he or she invest in to have the most impact? Besides these issues, an instructor reading this literature has to wade through many findings about factors that teachers have little control over in order to find areas that a teacher can affect. And the retention literature often fails to get specific about teacher behaviors that can improve retention.

One can avoid some of these problems by checking the standard academic psychological literature. It contains abundant research on such topics as motivation and persistence. Psychologists report that they find growing evidence that certain factors have a powerful influence on people's motivation and persistence. Because many researchers have contributed to this body of evidence, it seems safe for teachers to put it into practice. We need to find the relevant material, however.

We can locate relevant material if we can classify student retention and dropping out as instances of general psychological phenomena. I see it as helpful to think of student retention in classes as an example of various students' decisions to persist working in classes, despite the various things influencing them to drop out. Given this way of thinking, what psychologists have found out about task persistence should apply to our students.

A student's decision to persist covers several kinds of things: (1) Re-enrolling for another college term, (2) staying enrolled in a class until the end of the term, (3) continuing to do the work assigned by the instructor, (4) making an effort to succeed, and (5) reacting when trouble occurs by increasing effort. General psychological findings about persistence should apply to these student behaviaors. Moreover, since students' decisions and actions are influenced by their cognitions and motivations, it is fair to use any general psychological findings that apply to thought and motivation.

I want to report some well-established findings that pertain to persistence

that derive from 5 areas in psychology. Most of this material is from the mainstream of psychology and can be readily explored and verified by the interested reader. The five areas pertain to: (1) goals, subgoals, and feedback; (2) expectancy-value theories; (3) perceived self-efficacy; (4) attributions; and (5) the interruption-discrepancy theory of emotions. Here is a brief peek at what the theories talk about.

1. Goals, subgoals and feedback: People's persistence at a task is influenced by what their goals are, by whether or not they have formulated a series of subgoals that leads to the overall goal, and by whether they get feedback to their actions.

2. Expectancy-value theories: People's motivation and persistence at a task is influenced jointly by (a) the degree to which they expect that their actions will lead to results, and (b) by the degree to which they value those results.

3. Perceived self-efficacy: People's persistence at a task is influenced by their perceived self-efficacy for accomplishing the task.

4. Attributions: People's persistence at a task is heavily influenced by the reasons that they attribute for their past successes and failures at the same or similar tasks.

5. Interruption-discrepancy theory of emotions: People's persistence at a task is heavily influenced by the emotions they feel when they meet problems that interrupt them from completing tasks.

The rest of this paper is divided into two parts: The first part lists a series of specific psychological findings for each area of research. The second part lists a series of practical suggestions that teachers can use, and each suggestion is drawn from the preceding lists of findings.

Most readers will be able to take the original psychological findings and generate additional implications and practical ideas that I haven't thought of. As long as the practical ideas are consistent with well-confirmed psychological findings and do not have bad side-effects, we can expect that they will improve students' willingness to persist.

There are many more areas within psychology, social psychology and sociology that contain well-established findings that can be brought to bear on teachers and student retention. I suggest that interested readers invite their local social science instructors out for a cup of tea and start asking questions. Then get the social scientists to state their knowledge in straightforward cause-effect statements. After that, you trace out the applications to the situation of a teacher who wants to encourage students to persist in classes.

LISTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Note that the principles are listed in two columns. The left column describes causes of persistence. The right column describes causes of giving up. The right column contains a negatively stated version of the first column's statement. My purpose is to make clearer what the principles mean.

GOALS, SUB-GOALS AND FEEDBACK

Causes of Persistence	Causes of Giving Up
1. People who have a goal tend to persist in doing actions intended to reach the goal until they reach it.	1. People who lack a goal do not tend to persist in organized actions.
2. If people's goals match their assigned tasks, they tend to persist in doing actions until they reach the goal of finishing the tasks.	2. If people's goals do not match their assigned tasks, they tend to act to accomplish their goals rather than their tasks.
3. If people's goals are arranged in a series of sub-goals leading to a distant overall goal, they tend to persist trying until they reach the overall goal.	3. If people's goals are merely overall distant goals, they are likely to give up before they reach their goals.
4. If people have defined their goals in terms of specific criteria by which they can measure how closely they have achieved their goals, they are likely to persist acting until they reach their goals.	4. If people just have vague ideas of what they would see-hear-feel when they reach their goals, they are likely to quit working before they reach their goals, OR they will work too much OR work in irrelevent ways.
5. If people receive feedback about how well their actions are producing results that match the goal criteria, they will tend to persist acting until they reach their goals.	5. If people act and do not receive feedback on how well their actions have produced results that match the goal criteria, they will tend to quit before reaching their goals OR work too much OR work irrelevently.
6. If people set one of their sub-goals to search for feedback and to use it to measure their progress towards reaching their overall goals, they will tend to persist.	6. If people do set a sub-goal to search for feedback and to use it, they will tend to quit early OR work too much OR work irrelevently.

EXPECTANCY AND VALUE

Causes of Persistence

1. If people expect that their actions have a high probability of producing results and that the results will be followed by a valued reward, they will tend to persist in their actions.

Causes of Giving Up

1. (a) If people expect that their actions are unlikely to produce results that will be followed by a valued reward, they will tend to quit those actions.

1. (b) If people expect that their actions are likely to produce results, BUT that the results are unlikely to be followed by a valued reward, they will tend to quit those actions.

PERCEIVED SELF-EFFICACY

Definition: People's perceived self-efficacy means their "judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance."

PSE means people's judgments of their capability to accomplish a certain level of performance.

It is what people think they can do under given circumstances.

It is NOT raw skills, but people's personal assessments of what they can do with whatever skills they possess.

(These definitions are taken from Albert Bandura, The Social Foundations of Thought and Action.)

Causes of Persistence

1. If people's perceived self-efficacy for a certain task matches their estimates of how much the task demands, they will tend to persist in working on it.

2. If people believe that they have a high self-efficacy for a task, even in the face of obstacles or aversive experiences, they will tend to make vigorous and persistent efforts to complete it.

Causes of Giving Up

1. If people's perceived self-efficacy for a task is lower than their estimates of the task's demands, they will tend to give up doing it.

2. If people believe that they have low self-efficacy for a task, then in the face of obstacles or aversive experiences, they will tend to give up working on it.

3. If people try a task and succeed, their perceived self-efficacy rises; and when they try the task again, their persistence is greater.	3. If people try a task and encounter repeated failures, their perceived self-efficacy drops; and when they try the task again, they tend to give up early.
4. If people try a task, succeed at first, and later encounter repeated failures, their perceived self-efficacy may stay reasonably high and they may persist in their efforts to accomplish the task.	4. If people try a task and encounter repeated failures early in the course of events, they are likely to lower their perceived self-efficacy and to give up early.
5. If people try a task and do NOT try as hard as they can and encounter repeated failures, they tend to persist in their efforts.	5. If people try a task and try as hard as they can and still encounter repeated failures, they are likely to lower their perceived self-efficacy and to give up early.
6. If people try a task and encounter adverse external circumstances and fail, they tend to persist in their efforts.	6. If people try a task and are NOT blocked by adverse external circumstances and fail, they are likely to lower their perceived self-efficacy and to give up early.
7. If people observe someone else attempt to do a task and succeed, they are likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy and to persist longer in their own efforts.	7. If people lack a successful model to observe, they are likely to use only their own experiences as the source of their perceived self-efficacy and tendencies to persist.
8. If people watch a model who is similar to them attempt to do a task and to succeed, they are especially likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy and to persist in their own efforts.	8. If people watch a model dissimilar to them attempt to do a task and succeed, they are not likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy or their tendency to persist.
9. If people are uncertain about their self-efficacy and watch a model attempt a task and succeed, they are likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy and to persist.	9. If a people feel certain about their self-efficacy--either high or low--and watch a model attempt a task and succeed, they are not likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy or their tendency to persist.
10. If people watch a model who uses a different technique for doing a task than they have used and they see it succeed, they are likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy and to persist in their efforts.	10. If people watch a model succeed who uses the same technique that they have used and failed with, they are not likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy or their tendency to persist.

11. If people listen to someone try to persuade them that they have the ability to do a task successfully AND they already have reasonably high self-efficacy, then they are likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy and their persistence.

12. It is easier for another's persuasion to lower people's perceived self-efficacy and persistence than it is to raise them.

11. If people listen to someone try to persuade them that they have the ability to do a task successfully BUT they have a low self-efficacy, they are not likely to raise their perceived self-efficacy or their persistence.

INTERRUPTION-DISCREPANCY THEORY OF EMOTIONS

1. If people are doing a task and notice symptoms of physiological arousal (rapid heartbeat and breathing, flushing, tension) and interpret them as safe signs that have no implications as to whether they will succeed or fail, then they are likely to keep their perceived self-efficacy at the same level and to persist.

2. If people are doing a task and expect to have some "normal" trouble in doing it with one set of methods and also know some alternative actions that are likely to be effective, THEN if they experience an interruption OR experience a discrepancy between their expectations and reality, they are likely to experience physiological arousal but feel safe and persist.

3. If people are assigned tasks that have a low probability of being interrupted (not completed), then they are not likely to feel anxiety.

1. If people are doing a task and notice symptoms of physiological arousal and interpret them as ominous signs that they may fail in their task, then they are likely to lower their perceived self-efficacy and be more likely to give up. (Example: feeling anxious, noticing it, and being anxious that it will make one fail. Worrying about worry.)

2. If people are doing a task and expect to be able to use one set of methods to complete it successfully with little trouble, THEN if they experience an interruption OR experience a discrepancy between their expectations and reality, they are likely to feel physiological arousal, to interpret it as an ominous sign of failure, and to give up trying.

3. If people are assigned tasks that have a high probability of being interrupted (not completed), then people are likely to feel anxiety.

ATTRIBUTIONS

Definition: An attribution is a reason that a person gives for the cause of an event. For our interest in student persistence or giving up, the most interesting attributions are those that students give concerning their past successes and failures.

Psychologists have found these types of attributions to be especially important: external vs. internal reasons (something in me, something in my environment), local vs. global reasons (something that applies to a limited situation, something that applies everywhere), temporary vs. permanent reasons, and controllable vs. uncontrollable reasons. And they have studied the following 5 categories of attributions especially: luck, high and low ability, hard and easy tasks, high and low effort, use of the right or wrong technique.

Causes of Persistence	Causes of Giving Up
1. If people fail at a task and attribute it to temporary controllable factors, they are likely to persist at the task later.	1. If people fail at a task and attribute it to permanent or uncontrollable factors, they are likely to give up trying.
2. If people fail at a task and attribute it to a temporary hard task, they are likely to persist at the task later.	2. If people fail at a task and attribute it to a permanent hard task, they are likely to give up.
3. If people fail at a task and attribute it to bad luck, they are likely to persist at the task later.	3. If people fail at a task and attribute it to permanent bad luck, they are likely to give up.
4. If people fail at a task and attribute it to low ability that is just local to this task or which can be improved, they are likely to persist at the task.	4. If people fail at a task and attribute it to permanent or general low ability, they are likely to give up.
5. If people fail at a task and attribute it to not exerting enough effort, they are likely to persist at the task.	5. If people fail at a task and believe they exerted enough effort or have no more effort to give, they are likely to give up.

6. If people fail at a task and attribute it to their use of the wrong technique, they are likely to switch techniques and persist at the task.

7. If people succeed at a task and attribute it to controllable high ability, permanent average task difficulty, use of enough effort, and use of the right technique (controllable), they are likely to persist at the task later.

6. If people fail at a task and do not attribute it to a changeable technique, they are likely to give up.

7. If people succeed at a task and attribute it to temporary good luck or to a temporary easy task, they are likely to give up if the next attempts encounter obstacles.

SOME TECHNIQUES FOR ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO PERSIST

The following pages contain suggestions of techniques that teachers can use to encourage students to persist. They are all derived from the preceding cause-effect findings from psychology. The left column describes the suggestions. The right column, entitled "Purposes", describes each suggestion's purpose in terms of the general area of theory that it comes from. The suggestions are given in the spirit of tools for a carpenter's toolbox: several tools could be used for each situation, and different carpenters use different tools.

Suggestions	Purposes
Provide information on methods for doing assignments so that students who have initial trouble doing them can succeed by switching to alternative methods. Tell the students clearly about these alternatives.	To provide expectancy of success. To prevent attributions of low ability. To lower anxiety. To raise perceived self-efficacy.
When setting up reading assignments, cite alternative reading that also explains the material.	Same purposes
For lectures provide alternative ways for students who miss to get access to the missed information. Audio tapes of the class. Student notes. Tutoring from an aide. Reading material.	Same purposes
For homework assignments, besides giving training and instruction for doing homework problems, add training for what to do when a student encounters trouble, a block, very hard problems. Teach students where to search for principles and operators and problem features that will get the students unstuck.	Same purposes
Before tests teach students how to deal with the situation of reading a test item and failing to recall knowledge and skills that were once learned.	Same purposes

Provide helpful people who are perceived as available and non-punitive. Create a homework hotline staffed during stated hours. Provide the instructor's office hours and phone number along with a promise that he or she is willing to answer reasonable questions. Give out the instructor's home phone number along with hours when it is acceptable to call. Provide tutors and aides.	To provide expectancy of success. To provide a positively valued experience when they ask for help. To provide contact with people who can fight students' negative attributions.
Set up rules for grading so that students who have low grades know that there are things they can do to raise them. Make it rational to persist. Do this until as late in the term as possible. Do as much as is ethical and practical. (1) Permit students with low grades to do retests or do other work to raise the grades. (2) Use cumulative testing, so that students who don't master material early in the term but who get it mastered later can get credit for it. (3) Provide variable credit so that a person can safely stay enrolled, continue working, avoid a low grade, and get some credit for the course. (4) Provide Incomplete grades so that it is safe to stay in the course and not drop it.	To provide expectancy of success, despite initial troubles. To lower the perceived discrepancy between expected trouble and real trouble and lessen emotional trauma. To lower anxiety. To add valued sub-goals. To change attributions for failure from permanent causes to changeable causes.
Teachers should assess the material in the various parts of their courses as to its difficulty, and design their help for these portions.	To target aid to situations where students will have the lowest expectancy of success, the lowest sense of self-efficacy, the most negative attributions, and the most negative emotions.

Analyze the content of the hard section and decide whether: (1) it involves important prerequisite skills that will be used in later parts of the course; or (2) it is self-contained. Then tell the students this information and how important it is to work until it is mastered.	(1) The purpose if prerequisites are involved: To increase the value of studying the material and to set the goal for expending a lot of effort. (2) The purpose if material is self-contained: To lower anxiety about consequences of failure and to maintain perceived self-efficacy for later parts of the course, because success on them doesn't depend on mastering the hard part.
Just before students encounter a hard task in a course or a hard part of the course, the teacher should talk about these things: (1) That the upcoming section is hard, that they should expect the work to take awhile, that few people ever do it without making mistakes, that few people ever do it quickly; (2) That there are resources and alternative study methods available for students; (3) That the length of time they will be working on this hard part is (X) days.	To create attributions of temporary, but controllable, task difficulty. To prevent attributions of permanent task difficulty or low ability or excess effort required. To create attributions in case of trouble that the students used the wrong method or did not exert enough effort. To create expectancy of success. To lower the perceived discrepancy between expected difficulty and real difficulty and lessen emotional trauma. To lower anxiety.
Make yourself "psychologically accessible" to students. (The next several items are on this topic.)	If students see the teacher as approachable and do not expect an encounter to be unpleasant, they are willing to ask for help when in trouble. To increase the value and expectancy of success of the action of approaching the teacher.
Occasionally describe your daily problems and helplessness.	Same purposes. Students who feel frustrated feel safe approaching teachers who also make mistakes.
Ask for help: request examples that will assist in teaching a topic, ask for ideas to advance important unsolved intellectual problems, ask for teaching ideas to clarify complex material.	Same purposes. When students hear teachers asking for help, they expect a non-critical reception.

Say that you know that students always make normal mistakes as a part of learning. Say that you expect it will take a long time to learn certain topics. Say that you expect that some people with low grades will persist and get higher grades and that you respect that.	Same purpose. And to create attributions that mistakes and problems are temporary and controllable.
When you interact with students, mirror their postures or voice tones. Use their habitual language about the senses they perceive the world in: sight, sound, feeling, etc. Adjust your language to talk in some of their concepts.	Same purpose. When student sees teacher as similar, student feels safer in approaching teacher. And to increase perceived self-efficacy.
Invite students to visit you in your office. Initate conversations with students, especially with shy students who would avoid you. Do this often enough that they perceive you as familiar, safe, comfortable.	Same purpose.
When students approach you, talk to you, and ask questions in class or out of class, display your pleasure and appreciation that they approached you.	Same purpose.
When introducing information, use the "useful empty category" technique. (Name a goal of knowing a certain bit of knowledge or skill; note that currently we have not satisfied it; announce that you are going fulfill it and that they should listen for it; then give the information.)	To activate goals. To improve memory and understanding of material.
After learning some facts and principles, provide a demonstration that uses them and exemplifies usefulness, power, beauty, play, etc.	To increase the perceived value of the material. To build expectation that all material will be valuable.
If it is true in your class that many people who get low grades initially will end the term with much higher grades, tell the students that finding.	To build expectancy of success, despite apparent trouble. To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy.

Describe the value of the knowledge and skills that you teach.	To raise the perceived value of material. To increase acceptance of instructional goals.
State instructional goals, objectives, intended outcomes.	To arouse goal-directed behavior.
When assigning tasks, state the goals for doing the tasks.	To make students' goals match their assigned tasks.
Organize instructional material into a series of attainable sub-goals that lead to the overall goals. Tell the students about this organization, and remind them frequently what sub-goals they are currently working on.	To arouse goal-directed behavior. To increase perceived self-efficacy. To increase perceived value of material.
When teaching skills to students, set a series of "beginner's sub-goals", so that you tell students how much to expect or aim for at each practice session.	To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy. To set appropriate goals. To prevent students from setting unrealistically high goals.
Teach students the criteria that identify how well they are achieving the instructional goals.	To arouse goal-directed behavior. To increase success. To permit students to generate their own feedback and evaluate it.
Teach students how to identify the feedback they are getting as to how well they are producing results that match the goal criteria.	Same as above.
Teach students to set one of their sub-goals to search for feedback and to use it to guide their studying and practice.	To increase success. To increase student autonomy in attaining goals. To increase perceived self-efficacy.
Try to persuade students in a friendly way, respecting their freedom, to do their homework. Promise benefits and describe harms from delaying it.	To raise value of homework. To get them to do it so that their success increases and therefore that their perceived self-efficacy and persistence increase.
Provide practice tests for students to use before real tests. Use items similar in form to real test and which reach the same instructional goals. Cover all topics on test.	To make instructional goals real. To provide feedback. To increase effort and success and perceived self-efficacy and persistence.

When you believe students have the ability to do a certain task, say so explicitly to them. State any evidence you have of their skills.	To raise students' perceived self-efficacy. To increase their effort and success.
When you believe students cannot yet do a task but you believe that if they will use a certain study method that success is likely, then say so explicitly to them.	Same purposes.
When possible, get students' friends to encourage them to persist.	To use the power of natural groups to increase persistence.
Learn several good methods that students can use to study your material. Tell the students that you know these methods. Share them when appropriate.	To have real alternatives. To provide attributions regarding use of right and wrong methods. To raise perceive self-efficacy.
Make the content of your instruction absolutely consistent with your tests.	To create expectancy of success on tests. To create perception of fairness.
Meditate on the value of your material--in whole and in part. Avoid getting bored with your material. Avoid getting caught up with day-to-day tasks and forgetting the valid purposes you and the students have.	To make your non-verbal communication express the value of the material. To increase students' acceptance of the instructional goals.
Meditate on your belief that most students can learn effective techniques for studying.	To make your non-verbal communication express your belief that most students can succeed. To help your non-verbal communication raise students' perceived self-efficacy.
Make your test items fair. Eliminate bad items. Be fair in grading. Use conventional widely-accepted methods for determining grades. Explain to students your objectives, item choices, criteria for good answers, and cutting points between grades.	To help students accept the social contract and persist. To prevent students in trouble from making attributions that blame injustice, bad luck, etc. To help students attribute their trouble to lack of effort and use of wrong study methods along.

Cope with students of varying skills. Test and place. Provide training in missing pre-skills when possible. Provide easy track "C" option for poorer students.	To provide expectancy of success for poorer students. To prevent students from making negative attribution to their poor ability and permanent hard task.
Advertize "coming attractions". Tell students of upcoming interesting class sessions.	To increase value of coming to class or reading certain assignments.
Quote advice from past students. Tell true stories with this format: Past student meets difficulty, student has trouble with one technique, student tries again with another technique, student persists for necessary length of time, and finally student succeeds.	To use modeling principles for raising students' perceived self-efficacy.
Have current students write letters to future students on the theme of "How I Survived This Class." Pass out excerpts from the best to your next class.	To use modeling principles.
Take responsibility for defining the meaning of troubles, of getting stuck in a problem or lab, and of failures. Don't let students come upon the normal troubles of all students and mislabel them as signs of permanent trouble due to their own inade-quacies. When you know that a certain task will arouse strong emotions (frustration, rage, dejection, annoyance, impatience, etc.), warn the students in advance to expect the emotions. Explain that the emotions are normal and that they show the student cares deeply.	To provide hopeful attributions. To prevent attributions to low ability and permanent hard task. To provide benign interpretations for the strong emotions that students will feel as they study and encounter problems.
As students receive grades, provide them with calculations so that they know what grades they need on future assignments to reach targets of A, B, or C. (This can be done on a micro-computer spreadsheet.)	To give students a realistic expectancy of success. To prevent overly negative interpretations of low grades. To prevent overly positive inter-pretations of high grades.

Try to gather informal data from the students about their perceived self-efficacy for assignments. Also gather data on other key influences of persistence: values, goals, attributions, etc.	To let you the instructor know when you need to encourage students.
Try to provide students the perception that they are succeeding early in new tasks. Avoid letting students believe they are encountering significant failures early in tackling new tasks.	To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy.
When students try hard and report trouble, suggest they try different methods.	To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy. To encourage attributions to right and wrong methods.
When students try hard and report trouble, give them a realistic time frame for practice to take effect. Also define a series of sub-goals that define a gradual improvement.	To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy. To encourage them to attribute their troubles to lack of enough effort over a long enough time.
When students try hard and report trouble, check whether they were partly blocked by adverse external circumstances that interfered with effective study. Encourage them to attribute their trouble to these obstacles. Arrange to change them.	To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy. To suggest that they attribute their troubles to a temporary hard task.
When you believe that it is likely that students are not trying hard enough, pause and consider and plan tactful respectful ways to say this to students. If it is possible and honest at all, instead attribute their trouble to something they can change with dignity: a study or practice method, a pattern of study time (distributed or concentrated), attention to feedback, etc. Avoid blaming them sarcastically for "not trying" or "not caring".	To prevent a drop in the expectancy and value of trying to work in your course. One major reward and punishment that students put a value on is the opinion of important other people, namely a teacher. They also feel very protective about their sincere efforts to try, even if they are feeble. If you blame them for not trying, even correctly, they may estimate that they will have no success in getting the valuable reward of your respect and approval. Then they will stop working.
Avoid statements that imply you believe students cannot eventually succeed at a task.	To prevent a drop in perceived self-efficacy, because it is far easier to lower it than to raise it.

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